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An African Rapid-deployment Force for Peace Operations on the African Continent

by Colonel McGill Alexander, South African Army
Commentary by Major Mark Mills, United States Army
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COMMENTARY

Peace operations in Africa, a topic that understandably would not have drawn much interest in the United States prior to Somalia and Rwanda, now is very relevant to U.S. National Security Strategy. These deployments have made peace operations, and all Operations Other Than War (OOTW) in Africa, a significant part of our current military history and a realistic possibility for future military involvement. As a result, there has been much more discussion, debate and dialogue, both in the U.S. military itself, and with many of the other major contributors to U.N. peace efforts in Africa. To expand this discussion and initiate further global informational exchanges, the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) offers the perspective of an African soldier, Colonel McGill Alexander of the South African Army. Colonel Alexander's article, *An African Rapid-Deployment Force for Peace Operations on the African Continent*, was the winner of the 1994 South African Barcom Competition for Professional Military Writing, first published in the *African Armed Forces Journal*. A special thanks to *African Armed Forces Journal* and its editor, Mr. S.J. McIntosh, for allowing FMSO to republish Colonel Alexander's article.

Colonel Alexander has had years of operational experience in Angola and Namibia, participating in airborne, air assault, and mechanized operations. He has also had experience in internal security operations within South Africa. Most notably, Colonel Alexander served as the Commander, 44 Parachute Brigade, the Commander of the Johannesburg Military District, the Officer Commanding of the Senior Staff Officers' Course (the South African equivalent of the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff Officers' Course), and is currently attending the South African Military Attach, Course. Colonel Alexander's considerable experience in a wide range of military operations in southern Africa provides an excellent source of institutional knowledge. For the last 20 years the South African Army has been involved in numerous military operations ranging from internal security and border patrol operations in South Africa to mechanized and airborne operations in Angola. The South African Army's tactical successes were largely due to the application of lessons learned to their training, tactics, doctrine and equipment development, as well as their familiarity with and expertise in operating in the environs of southern Africa.

From this background Colonel Alexander offers a hypothetical force for peace operations in Africa that he intends to be a realistic start point for discussions. The term "hypothetical" allows for the flexibility of modifying this force enough to meet international and national acceptance and to encourage eventual participation. Peace operations, as Colonel Alexander uses the term, comprise the entire spectrum of OOTW from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to possible peace enforcement should the situation escalate. This force is designed specifically for an African theater of operations taking into account the potential threat, the lack of infrastructure, and the need for international assistance and

legitimacy. The force is composed of military units from the African region and employed under the concepts of joint and combined operations.

Colonel Alexander specifically addresses the issues of international and regional legitimacy, nature and composition of the force and its primary and collateral missions. With this proposal he also implies the acceptance of a new regional security role for post-apartheid South Africa. The implication is that the new, integrated South African National Defense Force wants to be considered a leader in stabilizing the region and no longer be viewed as a threat to regional security.

The idea of "regional peacekeeping" is an appealing concept for many of the countries now shouldering a large portion of the United Nations missions. It implies that each region's countries will, under the auspices of an international or regional organization, actively work to solve the problems in their corner of the world. While this does not absolve the international community of its moral responsibilities to monitor and assist when necessary, the principle of regional peacekeeping does go far to limit the introduction of ground forces from outside the region experiencing the crisis. The first step necessary for regional peacekeeping to become a reality is the political willingness of the nations in the region to participate. Colonel Alexander's article takes the next practical step -- proposing a force to execute the mission.

"Speed is the essence of war. Take advantage of the enemy's unpreparedness; travel by unexpected routes and strike him where he has taken no precautions."

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, c.500BC

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the concept of the speedy employment of immediately available military forces to world trouble spots has taken on a new meaning. This is largely due to advances in military technology and the reality of the "global village". Modern communications have turned all the nations of the world into neighbors, with shared responsibilities for peace and security.

Conflicts such as the Gulf War, the Bosnian debacle and the internecine slaughter in Rwanda have pricked the international conscience and heightened a growing international and regional sense of communal liability. This in turn has seen a new, more respectable role for armed forces: that of preventing, or at least minimizing, armed conflict.

In the wake of this interest in military "fire-fighting" or "fire-prevention", an old concept has gained new popularity with the cliché, "Rapid Deployment Forces" (RDF).

Africa, particularly, has over the past three decades or more, shown itself to be singularly susceptible to military intervention. For the most part, this has been carried out by powers outside of Africa. However, with the democratization of South Africa and its return to the respectable international community, there is an enhanced awareness amongst members of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) that Africa itself could provide a Rapid Deployment Force for action within the continent.

AIM AND SCOPE

It is felt, therefore, that it would be apt to consider the viability of an indigenous Rapid Deployment Force for Africa, with a view to employing it in operations to prevent conflict or establish peace. To do this a brief historical perspective would be useful before defining rapid deployment. The possible roles of an African Rapid Deployment Force then need to be identified. Thereafter, the most suitable type of force for rapid deployment needs to be examined, in conjunction with its collateral utility. Finally, some attention will also need to be given to the international composition of the force and its

command and control set-up.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since the former European colonies of Africa began obtaining their modern independence in the late fifties and early sixties, the continent has been in a state of almost constant upheaval. The combined Anglo-French airborne and amphibious assault on Suez in 1956 signalled the start of what were to become regular interventions by former colonial powers in the affairs of Africa.

Like Suez, some of these were uninvited. Others were at the express request or with the consent of the African country concerned. In 1964, for instance, the then Republic of Congo (now Zaire) allowed Belgium to intervene to save some 550 Belgian and American hostages being held by secessionist Simba rebels in the cities of Stanleyville (Kisangani) and Paulis (Isiro). A Belgian parachute battalion was flown a distance of 11,500 km by 14 US Air Force C-130 Hercules aircraft, and parachuted in to carry out a remarkably successful operation. (See Fig 1).

When the Kenyan Army mutinied in 1964, the Kenyan government requested that the British put down the mutiny. Royal Marines and other light troops achieved this in a very short time. Similarly, when Swaziland experienced unrest in the sixties, it was the British, with an airlifted light infantry battalion, who restored and maintained order for the Swazi government.

During the 1978 attempt at secession by the Zairese province of Shaba, it was French paratroopers who jumped in at Kolwezi to rescue hostages and put the rebels to flight. In many former French colonies in Central Africa the French paratroopers and Foreign Legion have carried out successful interventionist actions.

In 1990, when US citizens in Liberia were threatened by the upheaval in that country, it was US Marines who were helicoptered from ship to shore to carry out the rescue. More recently, in Rwanda, the French again deployed paratroopers from their 11th Parachute Division to prevent further massacres.

It is interesting to note that those countries which have deliberately maintained the ability to intervene militarily in foreign countries, have established or earmarked specific forces for the role. The British, for instance, have their 5th Airborne Brigade, and their 3rd Commando Brigade which are earmarked for "out of the area" operations. It was units from these formations which provided the spearhead for the retaking of the Falkland Islands in 1982. The Belgians have their Para-Commando Brigade which is especially trained for operations in Africa. Similarly, the French 11th Parachute Division is the formation which always provides paratroopers for interventionist operations.

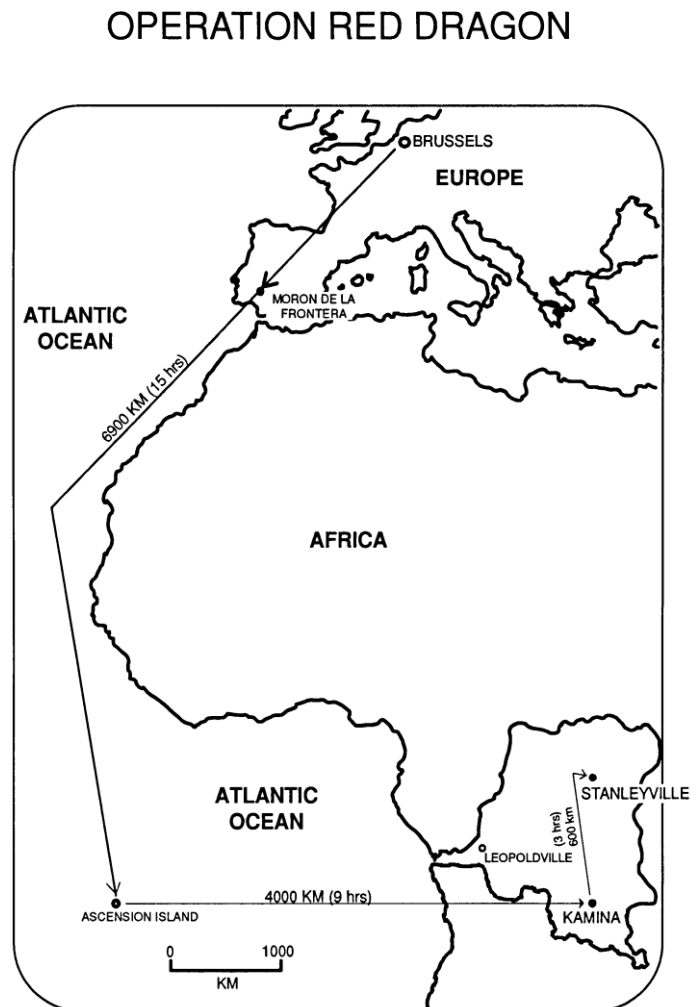


Figure 1 - Operation Red Dragon

Even the Americans resort first to their Ranger Battalions (as in the parachute assault on Grenada in 1983) or their 82nd Airborne Division (as in Panama in 1989), backed up by US Marines when they are required to deploy at speed to execute an interventionist operation.

India's force projection capabilities are centered around its 50 Independent Parachute Brigade. During the November 1988 attempted coup in the Maldives, India despatched two of the brigade's paracommando battalions with supporting units, by air, to its troubled neighbor within a day. They quickly defeated the rebels.

In all, it is significant that the core of these Rapid Deployment Forces is almost always an airborne spearhead, with a possible seaborne follow-up force of heavier and more sustainable capability.

DEFINING RAPID DEPLOYMENT

The concept of rapid deployment is open to many interpretations. Unless this concept is clearly defined as a starting point, any RDF is doomed to founder on a reef of ambiguity, confusion and an inability to come up to expectations.

A definition of rapid deployment, as the very name tells us, will need to be couched according to TIME (rapid) and DISTANCE (deployment).

It needs to be decided whether the time for an RDF to deploy must be measured in terms of hours, days, weeks or months. Distance, on the other hand, needs to be measured in terms of either thousands or of hundreds of kilometers.

In a continent like Africa, where volatile situations arise overnight, where distances are vast and infrastructure often nonexistent or inoperable, and where at least five countries consist of island archipelagoes, it must be glaringly apparent that any viable RDF would need to possess the inherent ability to deploy within hours over a distance of thousands of kilometers. This would probably most suitably define rapid deployment for Africa.

POSSIBLE ROLES OF AN AFRICAN RAPID DEPLOYMENT FORCE

Given, then, that an African RDF is available to operate over thousands of kilometers within a matter of hours, what are the roles and tasks which such a force could be called upon to perform?

Clearly, historical examples have provided some indication. It would, however, be essential for any employment of such an RDF to have international sanction so that its credibility is not undermined. In this regard the approval of the United Nations Organization is preferable, and at the very least that of the OAU will have to be obtained.

Endorsed with this credibility and international validity, the African RDF could be tasked within Africa to undertake the whole gamut of peace operations, ranging from monitoring through peace-keeping to peace-enforcement. Under the umbrella of peace operations many actions can be included, such as the restoration of a legitimate government which has been overthrown by force, the quelling of a civil war or the putting down of mutinies or violent industrial unrest.

The other area in which an African RDF could be utilized would be the protection or rescue of assets belonging to one country which may be threatened in another country when violence might prevail. In this regard one could consider the need to release hostages, to protect embassies, electrical installations, oil wells, mining projects and other industrial complexes.

SUITABILITY AND COLLATERAL UTILITY OF AN AFRICAN RDF

Once the definition of rapid deployment has been settled, and the likely tasks of an RDF have been identified, only then can the force be structured. In this regard, two questions are of cardinal importance:

"What is the most suitable type of force to form an RDF?"

"To what extent can the force's men and equipment be used for non-military tasks?"

The non-military tasks, or "collateral utility", are important because they serve to further justify any large expense in composing the force.

To start with, no RDF could be viably composed as a single-service organization. It is a common mistake to see an RDF as an Army force. However, no Army force is capable of moving thousands of kilometers without the help of the Navy or the Air Force. Equally, it is only the Air Force which is capable of transporting an Army force across thousands of kilometers in a matter of only hours. Unless the Navy and the Air Force, then, are included in the RDF right from the start, there cannot be proper synchronization of the acquisition, development and modification programs of the various services. This, coupled to a need for close and regular joint training, is the only way to ensure that one service does not harbor false or incorrect expectations of another. Avoidance of such false expectations will prevent misunderstandings and contribute towards the smooth execution of any operation. It follows, then, that any RDF headquarters will of necessity be a joint headquarters. This does not mean an Army headquarters with Air Force and Navy supporting staff or liaison officers; it means 'jointery' carried to its fullest consequences. Although there will be an appointed commander from one of the services (in all probability the Army), the staff will need to be fully integrated within the headquarters, and there will need to be decentralized command and control of the allocated assets. Only this will provide the required sense of ownership and resultant enthusiasm amongst all three arms of service. These assets, in the case of the Air Force, would need to include transport aircraft, and in the case of the Navy, replenishment vessels/amphibious assault ships designated for the RDF. In the case of the Army, the forces involved would need to be *dedicated*, rather than merely designated. The Army force, in turn, would need to be a light, air-transportable (and preferably air-droppable) force of a balanced composition. Ideally, it would be an independent parachute brigade, comprising primarily parachute infantry battalions with their support weapons, but including a light, armored anti-tank capability, light artillery, shoulder-launched anti-aircraft elements, combat engineering and signals capabilities as well as the necessary logistic support (which would include a heavy-drop air-supply capability).

It could be argued that a force of divisional or larger size would be more appropriate. This, however, would be unrealistic, with regard to affordability, maintenance, training, and the role required of the force. It should never be forgotten that an RDF is the initial force, to be inserted where required. Other forces, with greater sustainability, can be brought in later if needed, but these are not the Rapid Deployment Forces; they are just forces. A brigade, therefore, is most likely to be the correct size of RDF for Africa.

Such a force would have the flexibility and fire-power to deal with most conceivable threats in Africa. Its two major shortcomings would be its relative lack of tactical mobility and its limited armor protection. The first could be overcome by two overlying means.

Firstly, by utilizing the overriding strategic reach and mobility of the force. By placing the force, whether by air or by sea, directly on the "schwerpunkt" or decisive point, the need for further tactical mobility could be obviated. It is only by using an airborne or a seaborne force that this can be achieved. Secondly, the placing of transport helicopters near to the flashpoint concerned, even if their arrival takes place some time after the initial arrival of the RDF ground troops, vastly increases the tactical mobility of the force. Helicopters are rarely available in sufficient numbers to transport all the ground troops in a single lift, which, together with their limited range and payload, immediately inhibits their use for the initial insertion of the ground troops over a long distance.

Nevertheless, once the ground forces have been parachuted from or landed by long-range, fixed-wing transport aircraft, their mobility within the area of operations can be raised to phenomenally high and effective levels through judicious and controlled shuttling and leap-frogging by helicopters, under direct command of the Joint RDF Headquarters.

Analogically, any amphibious force arriving off the shore of a particular area of operations could transfer considerable numbers of men and material (the latter of substantial bulk and mass by employing the slinging technique) from ship to shore by using a shuttle service of available helicopters. Plainly, however, the vehicles and equipment of an RDF making use of the vessels and aircraft as outlined above, will have to conform to their capacities in terms of size, shape and mass. With specific reference to amphibious operations, the limiting factor will be the capacities of landing craft and of maritime transport helicopters, and not of the transport ships. To conform to the requirements of rapid deployment, no seaborne force can be dependent on harbor facilities.

For more protracted operations, the initially light forces which have been inserted could obviously be subsequently provided with armored personnel carriers, preferably of the wheeled, mine-resistant type known as the "Mamba", designed and developed in South Africa specifically for conditions in Africa. The other major shortcoming, that of a lack of armor protection, is not easily overcome. Limited armor in the form of light armored cars to provide a mobile anti-tank weapons platform is viable for an airborne RDF. Ultimately, however, it is the task that an RDF is expected to perform which will determine the need or not for armor protection. Propitiously, in a militarily unsophisticated environment such as Africa, and with the types of tasks already identified, the threat from armor would be very limited and probably within the constraints of what a strong airborne force could handle.

Nevertheless, provided a parachute brigade has sufficient light, air-droppable equipment, weapons and vehicles to provide the required firepower and logistic mobility, such a formation would be the one most suited to the role of an RDF. The fact that the vehicles and equipment used by a parachute brigade are relatively unsophisticated (when compared to those of mechanized and armored forces), extremely robust (due to the specifications for parachute drops) and very easily maintained in a state of immediate readiness, further adds to their suitability for an African RDF.

The lack of well-developed infrastructure in Africa is another pertinent reason for propagating a parachute force for this RDF. What infrastructure there is in Africa is easily reduced to inoperability (for example, the placing of vehicle wrecks and water-filled drums on the airfield at Stanleyville in 1964). It is here where the paratroopers, not reliant on any infrastructure such as roads, airfields and harbors, are inserted with ease.

Ultimately, however, it is the collateral utility of an RDF based on a parachute brigade that would appeal to the politicians who control the severely constrained purse strings in Africa. A parachute brigade is equipped with inexpensive weapons, ammunition and vehicles when these are contrasted with those of mechanized or armored brigades.

A parachute force is built primarily around personnel, not equipment, and the personnel are all selected volunteers. This is particularly important when considering peace support operations, which are extremely personnel-intensive. From a collateral utility viewpoint, however, the personnel, with their skills, highly-developed initiative and above-average physical standards, would be available for disaster relief, training aid, economic upliftment of disadvantaged communities, etc.

The most expensive components of an RDF built around a parachute brigade would be the "prime-movers": the transport helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft and transport ships. All of these, though, have unlimited collateral utility, both collectively and separately. Services such as search and rescue, drought and flood relief, refugee assistance, mercy missions and other forms of regional aid immediately come to mind. Here a heavy-drop air-supply capability could play a pivotal role.

A factor of considerable force in this argument is the fact that there are cases on record of the larger world powers, such as the USA and former Soviet Union, being prepared to provide aircraft or ships for military use, but not the ground troops to actually carry out the operation. Examples are US transport

aircraft for the Belgian intervention in Congo in 1964, and Soviet air and sea transport for Ethiopia during the Ogaden War in 1977-78.

More recently, at the time of the terrible events in Rwanda during 1994, Belgian, French and Italian paratroopers were flown to Africa to assist in the evacuation of their own nationals who had become refugees. United States, German, Dutch and Canadian transport aircraft were provided to assist in their mission. It is feasible, thus, provided that Africa has the paratroopers, to consider an approach to non-African countries to augment the expensive "prime-movers" for a specific, internationally acceptable operation.

Other types of ground forces, should they form part of such an RDF, would have as their most expensive components: main battle tanks, self-propelled artillery systems, guided anti-aircraft missile systems, sophisticated engineering plant and telecommunications systems; all of this backed up by a vast and complex logistic capability. Very little of this expensive equipment, though, has any collateral value at all.

Clearly, such sophisticated forces in an era of so-called peace, and in a continent as cash-strapped as Africa is, would only appeal to those politicians with unacceptable expansionist ambitions.

INTERNATIONAL COMPOSITION AND C2 SET-UP

In order to be assured of international credibility and neutrality, the African RDF would need to be composed of more than one country's forces. A very good model would probably be NATO's Allied Command Europe (ACE) Mobile Force. This brigade-sized force was initially comprised of various battalions (all with a specified parachute or air-transportable capability) provided by different countries, on a rotational basis extending over several years.

A more recently-formed NATO formation with lessons to offer in this regard would be the Multinational Division (Central), or MND(C). This division, comprising Belgian and German parachute/airborne brigades and Dutch and British airmobile brigades is obviously too large and technologically sophisticated to be used as a model for an African RDF. Yet it addresses all the crucial issues of combined international military forces, such as political control, military command, incompatible equipment, doctrine, languages and differing logistics systems.

Though South Africa might, for practical reasons, be required to permanently provide the core of an African RDF headquarters and perhaps a third or more of all the forces involved, other African countries could be persuaded to provide the remainder for rotating periods of, say, two years at a time. (See Fig 2). Naturally, the fact that the ground forces of such an RDF would require very little difficult-to-maintain or expensive equipment would make it a more viable option for Africa's economically strait-jacketed countries.

In addition, its international composition would place the force in a favorable position to conduct training exercises across realistic distances. Annual, or twice-yearly exercises, for instance, could be held in a different part of the continent on every occasion.

There is no doubt, though, that this RDF would, for purposes of command and control (C2), have to operate directly under an international body with acceptable credentials. Here the possibility of a body such as the OAU needs to be considered. Alternatively, a less ambitious and more regionally confined option could be considered under the auspices of any regional African security organization which might come into being.

HYPOTHETICAL COMPOSITION OF AN AFRICAN RAPID DEPLOYMENT FORCE

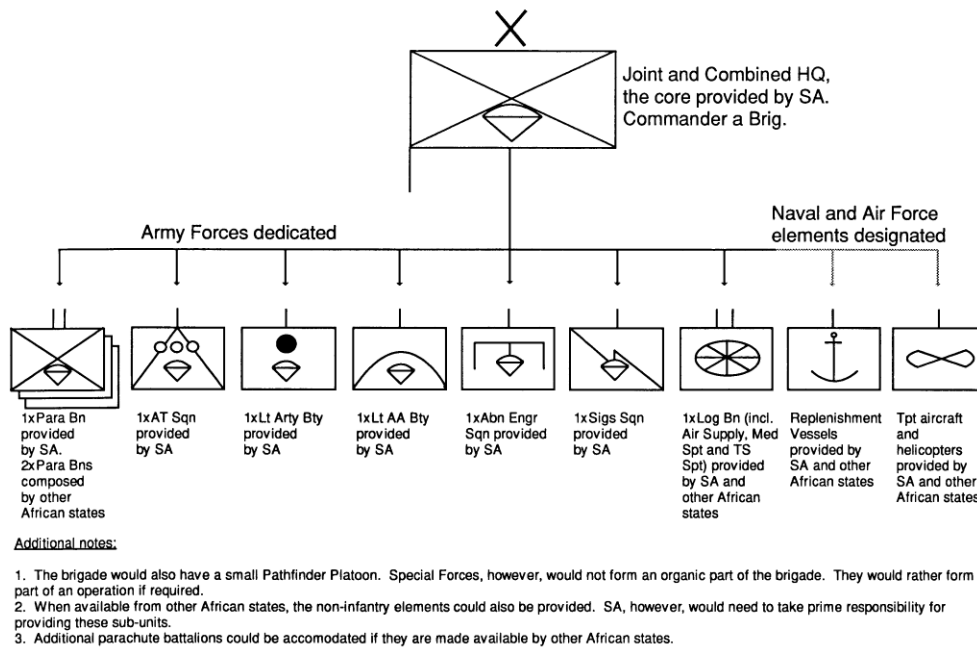


Figure 2 - Hypothetical composition of an African rapid deployment force.

This, by implication, could mean a separate RDF for Southern, East, West and perhaps North Africa. However, given the political climate in Southern Africa at present, as well as the level of recent operational military experience and expertise available in the new South Africa, it seems sensible to initiate the first such RDF in that austral region.

International or regional control of the African RDF would undoubtedly place a halter of indecisiveness around its employment. Yet without it, any action by the force would be branded as aggression or unwarranted interference. Political delays in decision-making are, in any case, beyond the scope of this argument, which is concerned solely with military capability.

CONCLUSION

Africa is an ideal arena in which to play the rapid deployment game, as has been shown by numerous former-colonial powers. This is particularly so for a multi-national force geared for peace-support operations. Once rapid deployment is defined as the movement of a battle-ready, balanced force over thousands of kilometers within a matter of hours, it becomes apparent that only a parachute force could viably form the ground element of such a proposed African RDF.

Any force lacking a viable strategic reach cannot be regarded as a rapid deployment force: it is merely another military force, though it might be able to react fairly quickly within major constraints of time and distance. Only an airborne or a seaborne force has strategic reach, and then it is only able to match all contingencies if it has a parachute and full-amphibious capability.

If an indigenous RDF is to be established in Africa, the decision to make it a light airborne/amphibious force would save millions in main equipment acquisition and maintenance, yet could provide the aircraft and ships for extensive collateral utility, making it an economically viable option.

A headquarters that is both joint and combined in the fullest sense of the words, an international composition and being placed under command of an international body would contribute substantially to the credibility and flexibility of such a force. This RDF would probably be politically, economically and militarily viable, and be a wonderful opportunity to weld the African military community together for peaceful purposes.

There can be no doubt that rapid deployment as a concept is firmly established in the modern military world. The suggestion put forward here for Africa leaves many questions unanswered. The "nitty-gritty" of implementing such a concept in Africa will doubtless cause many problems to surface. Yet none would be problems that have not been solved elsewhere in the world. A serious and dedicated approach by participants in such an undertaking, particularly if experienced non-African countries such as the USA and France are prepared to offer advice and assistance with their ships and aircraft, could certainly make the concept viable for Africa. France has expressed explicit interest in promoting the idea of an African RDF, and NATO has, in its almost half-century of existence, solved almost all the difficulties of integrating different doctrines, equipment, languages and logistic systems. The answers do exist, and the prize of peace, stability and prosperity in Africa, a continent of enormous potential, makes those answers worth finding.

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